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BLOG: Campaign dull and boring

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Abstract

The Federal election week started with a non-debate and didn't really improve after that, writes Anthony Ashbolt. The prelude to this week in federal politics was provided by a non-debate on Sunday evening. The debate failed not only because there was no real engagement and exchange between the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition but also because the format itself was so managed and staged that even the press gallery questioners appeared awkward and unsure of where they were meant to be.

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By ANTHONY ASHBOLT Aug. 16, 2013, 10:03 p.m.



The Federal election week started with a non-debate and didn't really improve after that, writes ANTHONY ASHBOLT.

The prelude to this week in federal politics was provided by a non-debate on Sunday evening.

The debate failed not only because there was no real engagement and exchange between the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition but also because the format itself was so managed and staged that even the press gallery questioners appeared awkward and unsure of where they were meant to be.

If there is to be another debate then Leigh Sales' suggestion to Tony Abbott last night that it be held in the ABC studio with her as moderator seems almost like a good idea. It at least would provide a plain uncluttered setting in which the two combatants could confront each other instead of talking intently to the camera in the hope that there are people out there taking notice. My guess is that people switched off after ten minutes and that this signals something about the campaign itself.

So far this campaign is lacklustre, visionless, devoid of genuine passion. Yet these are the sorts of ingredients it was thought that the return of Rudd would inject.

The problem is this— we are not just dealing with leadership in an election contest, even though that is a significant ingredient. We are also dealing with ideas about the past and the future, about what might make a better society. Disability insurance and education reforms fit into this but on the former the Opposition is in agreement and on the latter it pretends agreement.

[PREVIOUS BLOG: The language of election speak \(http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1695010/blog-the-language-of-election-speak/\)](http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1695010/blog-the-language-of-election-speak/)

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is running a campaign at the moment pointing out that the Opposition's funding stops after four years and this actually represents significant underfunding as around two-thirds of the spending is delayed until the last two years of a six year programme <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/abbotts-schools-pledge-a-sham-union/story-fn3dxiw...> (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/abbotts-schools-pledge-a-sham-union/story-fn3dxiwe-1226696707291>).

That itself, with due deference to the AEU, is not only a problem for the Opposition - it highlights a significant weakness in the Better Schools proposal, a weakness that exacerbates faults that have been with us from the beginning of Gonski.

For a start, the funding should not be subject to such a delay. So, too, the Gonski committee should never have been presented with an agenda that said no school would receive less federal funding under any new formula. This automatically entrenched privilege as there are many private schools that could (and some would say should) receive no Government funds at all. This is hardly unpalatable in the electorate as an Essential poll this week established that a majority of people (59%) thought that there should be cuts in federal aid to private schools <http://essentialvision.com.au/category/essentialreport> (<http://essentialvision.com.au/category/essentialreport/>).

The poll is interesting for other reasons also. It has the two party preferred vote at 51 to 49% and this is looking about as good as it gets for Labor at this stage with 52/48 being a more common poll result.

The simple fact is that Labor's momentum is slipping. Some will seek to blame leadership (again), some will see it as biased media (part of the story), some will see it is a failure to articulate a coherent set of policies. And for all the bias in the Murdoch press and even sections

of Fairfax, Labor has simply been unable to develop that new set of ideals that Rudd seemed to be offering.

● News ○ Business

The announcement yesterday of yet another regional tilt, "Growing the North", with the Northern Territory benefiting from eventual tax breaks testifies to muddled thinking on the Labor side. Given that the Coalition had already promised to look into developing the north, it also reeks of a catch-up mentality.

Regional policies are good when thought through in a fully informed fashion. Look back at the regional policies developed within Tom Uren's ministry during the Whitlam government in the early 1970s under the guidance of the very sharp scholar and policy advisor Patrick Troy, the Head of the Department of Urban and Regional Development.

Even some of those imaginative policies could not be implemented because of changes in economic circumstance.

In comparison, however, this northern proposal is half-baked and lacks not only economic but also environmental credibility. We have a fragile eco-system to confront in the north where there is a potential problem of over-development.

Also the opportunity exists, as explained by Andrew Campbell on ABC RN this morning, to develop renewable energy resources in the north that would help meet challenges this country and the region faces in the future. This sort of policy would be far more successful than the proposed expansion of the Ord irrigation scheme <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/labor-and-coalition-promise-northern-developm...> (<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/labor-and-coalition-promise-northern-development/4891384>).

There is, after all, a time to move forward rather than have our heads exposed to dreams of a northern food bowl.

One might have thought, on this score, that we would be hearing more loudly and clearly from the Greens about renewable energy, environmental degradation, climate change, threats to biodiversity and potential sustainability policies. It might just be that these issues are even more important than gay marriage in the long run. We cannot expect Labor to keep the Coalition honest on policies like climate change.

As revealed in the debate, Abbott still claims Australia is going at it alone internationally when that is simply not the case.

According to the Essential poll cited earlier the Greens are sitting on 8%. This is consistent with other polling. The decline since 2010 when the vote was 11.7% cannot just be explained in terms of leadership. The retirement of Bob Brown is important but the Party itself has lost some direction and at times seems to have shifted from an environmental focus.

The point is not for the Party to sacrifice broader concerns with social justice policy but it is for it to revitalise a sense of what the Green project should be. Otherwise a further decline in the polls is distinctly possible, as people become even more confused about where its priorities lie.

Abbott is having an easier ride than he should given the uncoded nature of his promises. A few slips of the tongue in relation to a candidate's image or the topic of gay marriage have done little to dent his campaign. Whipping up non-issues like the GST hardly helps the ALP.

Campaigning on positives such as the NBN, after and before-school care, maintenance of the Schoolkids bonus, proper and sustained funding for school education, fair work practices, effective action on climate change and so on could move Labor back into a more competitive position. At the moment, however, it tends to be grasping at straws.

Dr Anthony Ashbolt is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wollongong. He specialises in American politics and history but has taught and written about Australian politics and media politics for many years. He will be blogging for the Mercury on the Federal election campaign.

He is the main editor of the labour history journal Illawarra Unity and the author of A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013). He is also co-author (with colleague Glenn Mitchell) of a chapter in the recently published Red Strains: Music and Communism outside the Communist Bloc (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Many of his other publications can be found at Research Online at the University of Wollongong.